

The Fruits of Repentance
Luke 13:1-9
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In the early 1970s, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a very popular and influential book that is still looked at today as one of the most important books written in recent time. It was required reading in seminary for me. That book is called, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Kushner says on the first page of his book that this is the only question that really matters. It’s certainly a question I hear a lot, and one that I believe keeps a lot of people from greater faith, or from faith at all.

But notice that Kushner’s book isn’t called, “Why Bad Things Happen to God People.” Even though Kushner went through the pain of losing a son to a childhood illness, he doesn’t have an answer. He doesn’t know why, but he does know that, in the course of our lives, it will happen: good people will endure bad things.

This is not a new question. In fact, people were struggling to understand it back in Jesus’ time. What we have in the first part of today’s passage is a group of people trying to make sense of out of a senseless tragedy. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the area, had slaughtered a group of people from Galilee while they were offering sacrifices in the temple. It’s a terrible atrocity, as if occupying forces had invaded a church and killed the worshippers on Christmas Day.

Jesus’ audience wants to know why. Why did these people die? The popular belief of that day, and the closest they could come to an answer, was that bad things happening were God’s punishment for sinful behavior. This belief stretches all the way back to the book of Job, which is thought to be the oldest book in the Old Testament. Job was a man of faith who slowly lost everything that was important to him. While never losing faith, he struggled to understand why all these bad things are happening to him. He asked the question: Why me? And Job’s friend, Eliphaz, who I’m sure was just trying to be helpful, said, “Who that was innocent has ever perished?” In other words, “Well Job, if something bad is happening, you probably did something to deserve it.” With friends like Eliphaz, who needs enemies?

But that explanation was the best he could come up with, and we haven’t done much better since then. There are still people today who assume that tragedy is God’s way of getting our attention and punishing us for wrongdoing. I’ll never forget Jerry Falwell’s comments after Sept. 11. He said that America was getting what it deserved because it had pushed God to the fringes of society. Now, I don’t disagree with him on our treatment of God, but do we really believe in a God who would punish us with terrorist attacks?

Falwell, and others like him, could use a lesson from Jesus. When confronted with the deaths of these innocent folks in the temple, Jesus says, “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than others because of what happened to them?” I tell you, no!” But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He moves on to another incident, in which a tower in Siloam fell on a group of 18 people. There’s no one to blame for this incident, except for maybe the tower’s architect. And yet, when a natural disaster occurs, some people quickly look to God as the cause and culprit. Even insurance companies label such things “acts of God,” as if God reaches down and stirs up the wind so that a hurricane can exact divine justice.

Jesus actually uses some humor in helping the crowd understand how far-fetched their understanding of God is. When discussing the fallen tower, Jesus says, “Those people who died there – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Basically what he asking is, “Do you think the tower happened to fall on the 18 worst sinners in Jerusalem?” What a coincidence, right? The 18 worst sinners in all of Jerusalem all happened to be taking their smoke break near the tower at the same time! God sure does have good aim!

The interesting thing to note here is that Jesus doesn’t answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. If anyone could give us some insight into this, it would be him, and yet he leaves that question to make a more important point. Stop worrying about the fate of others and focus on your own need for repentance. That’s an interesting word, “repent.” The Hebrew word for “repentance” means “to turn back”; the Greek word means “to change one’s attitude or mind-set”. Repenting is not merely regretting things we’ve done wrong or apologizing for them. It’s agreeing that a change in direction is needed, and then working to make that change.

The crowd to whom Jesus was speaking needed a change in direction. You see, the Jewish people were growing increasingly agitated at the Roman occupation of Jerusalem. And the two events mentioned here could both have direct ties to a growing rebellion against Rome.

But Jesus came preaching peace, not rebellion. He came to offer a different kind of freedom than freedom from Rome. And the point he makes to the crowd is this: if you working to bring about a kingdom other than the kingdom of God, you will perish. If the Jewish nation didn’t change direction, if they kept on seeking an earthly kingdom and rejected the kingdom of God, they would meet a similar end. Those who pick up the sword will die by the sword.

Those consequences extend beyond this earthly life. The suffering and tragedy of this world are not a measure of a person’s righteousness. Good people die young, and scoundrels live to old age. There’s no explanation that will satisfy questions as to why that happens. It’s life. Everyone has to die; it’s part of being human. How and when we die has nothing to do with how spiritual or unspiritual we are. Now, at times we like to think that tragedies suffered by sinful people are a direct cause of their sins, because that then makes us feel better about ourselves. “She deserved that; look at the life she led.” But Jesus’ point is particularly cutting here: we all are going to die, and it is up to us to decide whether we accept the gift of eternal life Christ offers us, or not. We all have a debt of sin before God, and we all need to repent and ask forgiveness. Either we let Jesus pay that debt for us by his work on the cross, or we will have to pay it ourselves.

That’s what Jesus addresses in the second part of the passage with the parable about the unfruitful fig tree. An agricultural lesson is in order here to help us get the full impact of this story’s meaning. The maturation time span of a fig tree was about three years. After being planted and growing for three years, a fig tree should start producing fruit. Rich, farmable land was precious in this part of the world, so every plant and tree was expected to do its part. There was no reason to let an unfruitful tree use up good soil.

There’s a name for trees like that. When I played basketball in high school, I wasn’t particularly good, but I was particularly tall. That’s a big advantage in basketball. So the coach would put me in the game and tell me to stand near the basket so that the

opposing players couldn't get to it. Coach called me a space-eater. My job was to take up a lot of space.

The unfruitful tree is a space-eater. Notice that the tree hasn't done anything wrong. Its sin isn't that it did something it shouldn't. It's that it didn't do anything at all. It was just taking up space in the orchard. It was a waste of good soil.

That way of existing goes against the evolutionary process of our existence. Isn't it true that as our world develops, useful things are kept and useless things are discarded? How many of you remember floppy disks? Those 3 1/2" disks that you used for your computer? They've become the vinyl records of this generation. I have one on my computer desk that now I use as a coaster. As technology advanced, they no longer became useful. If you still have them lying around, they're a waste of your desk space.

What Jesus is warning against is living the life of an unfruitful fig tree. There are some people in this world who put in more than they take out, but there are others who take and take and take, but rarely give. Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "When I die, I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow." Some people plant flowers, others just take up the soil.

By combining these two stories together, Jesus is saying this: Life is fragile. People are still murdered and towers still fall. It's the result of living in an imperfect world, where we are subject to the cruel whims of diseases and drunk drivers and bad decisions. We have little control over when and how it will end. It could be tomorrow, or it could be decades from now. What we do have in our control is how we use whatever time we have left. If we don't believe in Christ, we can repent and change the direction of our life. If we do believe in Christ, and accept him as our Lord and Savior, we can use our time to pluck weeds and plant flowers, to bear fruit as we labor for the kingdom of God. We are fertilized by the richness of God's word and the abounding grace of God's spirit. We've been given all we need to continuing growing and bearing fruit. The sin of the fig tree wasn't that it was doing something it shouldn't. The sin of the fig tree was that it was doing nothing at all.